

THE AGE OF ELIZABETH IN THE AGE OF JOHNSON

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> vi
<i>Note on the texts and citation</i>	x
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xi

Introduction

Struggling to emerge from barbarity: historiography and the idea of the classic

Learning's triumph: historicism and the spirit of the age

Call Britannia's glories back to view: Tudor history and Hanoverian historians

The rage of Reformation: religious controversy and political stability

The ground-work of stile: language and national identity

Studied barbarity: Jonson, Spenser, and the idea of progress

The last age: Renaissance lost

Notes

Bibliography

Index

CHAPTER I

Struggling to emerge from barbarity: historiography and the idea of the classic

In a children's logic puzzle, an archaeologist discovers a Greek coin inscribed "413 B.C." and at once rejects it as fraudulent. The trick, of course, is that Plato's contemporaries could not date themselves "before Christ." Behind the puzzle lies a salutary reminder about periodization: few ages get to choose how the future will regard or name them. Because periods depend upon teleologies imposed in retrospect, antiquity could not conceive of itself as antique, and the Middle Ages could not view themselves as being in the middle of anything.

But the Renaissance is different. A group of Florentine scholars writing in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries seem to have willed their age into being in their own polemical act of periodization – "The legend of the Renaissance," writes C. S. Lewis, "is a Renaissance legend"¹ – and their self-constitution set the terms for subsequent efforts at periodizing the epoch. By distinguishing their own age from the ostensibly barbarous one before them, and by defining themselves in relation to their past, they created both the last age and their own, both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Theirs is the West's first self-conscious declaration of modernity. Half a millennium later, the humanists' account still dominates our historiography, after Michelet, after Burckhardt, even after modern critics have challenged the validity of their most basic claims to accuracy and originality.

A myth so hardy deserves to be taken seriously. To understand eighteenth-century conceptions of the Renaissance, it will be useful to trace this myth back to its origin in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and to follow it down through the next several hundred years. This is not to say that the myth was transmitted to the eighteenth century intact. In following it, we will have to negotiate many twists and turns; and we will inevitably project later ideas and teleologies onto the story, to some degree misrepresenting early humanistic thought by overemphasizing the elements which show up later. The sharp division between the Middle

Ages and the Renaissance, for instance, was not fully in place until the seventeenth century, and the aspects of humanism that later ages considered with the greatest attention were not always what the humanists themselves considered their essential business.²

Such a retrospective approach is not wholly unjustified, though, even if it risks distortion. The idea of the Renaissance was first embodied in a cluster of metaphors which have their origins in the early humanists. Later ages may have exaggerated their importance or understood them anachronistically, but these metaphors are the basis for eighteenth-century periodic conceptions, and provide the terms that Johnson's age used to tell the story of the transition from the "Gothic" age to the revival of learning. They show us what the eighteenth century believed about the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but more important, they show us how the eighteenth century regarded itself by using the past as a point of reference. The eighteenth century based much of its cultural identity on the age that came before it, just as the early humanists defined themselves in terms of their predecessors. I begin, therefore, by tracing the Renaissance myth from its birth in the age of Petrarch to the threshold of the age of the great nineteenth-century historiographers, and by looking at the way this myth helped to produce the most important literary by-product of periodization, the classic.

NOT A LINE DESERVING PRAISE

Humanist definitions of the self began with a definition of the other: in order to situate themselves historically, the early Italian humanists conceived a historical rupture between themselves and their immediate predecessors. However valid this notion may have been – our own age has been filled with challenges to its fundamental assumptions – many thinkers of the Renaissance saw it that way, and it was increasingly accepted over the next half millennium, to receive its definitive form in Burckhardt. As one critic puts it,

Whatever later historians may have thought about the matter, the humanists themselves were convinced that the movement which they represented marked a turning point in history. They believed, rightly or wrongly, that a dismal and barbaric age had at last come to an end, that the world was making a new start, and that they themselves were the first "modern" men.³

This break of medieval from modern depends upon another break, said to have happened some time around the fall of Rome – an event

recognized as momentous as soon as it happened, but given true epoch-making status only in the Renaissance. Exactly when this first break occurred was a matter of dispute. Sicco Polenton dates it from Juvenal's death (c. A.D. 140); Petrarch and Vasari, from Constantine's reign (A.D. 306–37); Favio Biondo, A.D. 412; Valla, the death of Boethius (c. A.D. 524). Whatever the exact date, though, the pattern is the same. On one side of the line are the cultures of Greece and Rome; on the other, a dark age, a millennium-long hiatus between classical and modern culture (characterized as a "Middle Age" as early as 1469) filled only with ignorance and barbarism.⁴

This distinction between antiquity and the Middle Ages made possible the distinction between the Middle Ages and modernity. According to humanist orthodoxy (and most subsequent historiography), a second historical rupture restored the classical culture to Europe in a *rinascimento* or *renaissance des beaux arts et des lettres*. Ficino, for instance, uses the myth of a golden age to celebrate the new era as a return to antiquity: "This age, like a golden age, has restored to light the nearly extinct liberal arts."⁵ Erasmus, too, was an enthusiastic panegyrist for the new era, delighting in "saeculo huic nostro," as he writes to Pope Leo X, "this age of ours, which has good hopes of becoming an age of gold, if there ever were such a thing."⁶ Such self-promotion colors most subsequent discussions of the period: centuries before the English first used the word "Renaissance," the myth of the restored golden age was in place.

This age shone the more brightly when set next to its darkened predecessor. In describing this contrast, humanist historians recapitulated and inverted a millennium-old historiographical metaphor. The Church Fathers, employing familiar biblical images, divided the dark pagan past from the bright Christian present. The humanists, on the other hand, fascinated by pre-Christian Rome, borrowed these biblical and patristic metaphors and polemically, even heretically, reversed them, labeling the Christian age benighted and the pagan centuries enlightened.⁷ Characterizing the Dark Ages was fraught with dangers, for it meant celebrating pagan culture at the expense of Christianity. Few in the Renaissance had the nerve to hazard Erasmus's directness – "The death of letters was to be laid at the door of the Christian religion," he writes, and insists "there is no erudition in existence except what is secular" – and the devout Erasmus is cautious enough to put this sentiment in the mouth of a character in a dialogue.⁸ But even those hesitant to draw attention to their rejection of patristic historiography were quick to employ images of light and darkness to distinguish the privileged classical past from medieval

barbarism. Light and darkness underlie one of the most common metaphors for understanding the break between the Renaissance and the Middle Ages, one in which the Middle Ages are defined by *lack*. For humanist historiographers, the millennium from the fourth century to the fourteenth is an “*aetas tenebrae*,” an age of darkness, devoid of the light of antiquity. Medieval culture was no culture; it was a mere interim with no positive identity. Since the Middle Ages are characterized by privation, we might call this the “privative” metaphor or model.

This conception apparently has its origin in Francesco Petrarca.⁹ It is safe to call the Middle Ages his invention: he was the first to draw a line between the ancient world and its barbarous modern successor. Modernity suffers by comparison with antiquity because it wants learning; he thereby denies barbarism any positive identity. This privative historiographical conception is perfectly in character for Petrarch, who makes similar distinctions in areas far from historiography – in ethical theory, for instance, he distinguishes the privative vice of ignorance from a more positive vice such as drunkenness: “Ignorance might be the consequence of laziness or inborn slowness; drunkenness is a vice of the will and the perverted mind.”¹⁰ Figuring darkness as the absence of light and evil as the absence of good, and denying positive existence to either, is a habit borrowed from his patristic hero, Augustine. The *locus classicus* of the Augustinian conception of evil appears in the *Confessions*: “All corrupted things are deprived of some good. If they were to be deprived of all good, they would not exist at all . . . All things that exist are good, and the evil I was considering is not a substance, for if it were a substance, it would be good.”¹¹ Petrarch’s life’s work was dispelling this darkness by distributing knowledge, defeating modern ignorance by disseminating ancient texts.

Others picked up this privative conception of the Middle Ages. Some shared his pessimistic evaluation of modernity: Poggio, for instance, uses the ruins of Rome as an analogue for the ruin of learning. In a dialogue of 1430, Antonio Lusco tells him: “Poggio, how far are these Capitoline ruins from those of which our Virgil sang: ‘Now golden, once bristling and overgrown with thorns.’ It’s better to transpose the verse: ‘Once golden, now rough with thorns and overgrown with briars.’”¹² Lorenzo Valla, on the other hand, develops Petrarch’s notions of privative medieval barbarism while celebrating the new restoration of classical learning: “As wretched as those earlier times were, when no learned man was found, so much more is our age to be praised, in which (if we exert ourselves a little more) I am confident that the Roman language will soon grow stronger than the city, and with it all disciplines will be restored.”¹³ True Latin,

lost during a millennium devoid of learned men, awaits restoration. Valla was ready to do his part to restore the ancient culture, to fill the medieval cultural void.

Such metaphors long outlived the Quattrocento, and flourished in England as well as in Italy, growing less ambivalent and more pointed as the years went by. Ben Jonson, for example, remarks of the Middle Ages that "All good poetry was flown, / And art banished," with "Not a poet in an age / Worth crowning, / Not a work deserving bays, / Not a line deserving praise," and William Camden likewise notes of England "that learning after long banishment, was recalled in the time of King *Henry* the eight."¹⁴ Such privative metaphors survive to this day, and even now dominate our nomenclature: whether the ages are characterized as Dark or Middle, they are a vast wasteland marked by lack; whether we call the succeeding age a Renaissance or the less judgmental "early modern," we tacitly admit the humanists' role in supplanting old darkness with new light. C. S. Lewis takes the humanists to task, but he is right to take them seriously, and to recognize just how radical their accusation was: "And what can *media* imply except that a thousand years of theology, metaphysics, jurisprudence, courtesy, poetry, and architecture are to be regarded as a mere gap, or chasm, or *entre-acte*?"¹⁵

BASE IDEAS MUST BE TORN OUT

What else can it imply? Lewis's question is disingenuous. However pervasive the privative metaphor, it provides only half the picture. In the privative model, the barbarians are marked only by lack: had they been given the classics, with their self-evident value, they would immediately have attained enlightenment. Merely ignorant barbarians pose little threat. Some, however, saw a more insidious variety of barbarism. The Middle Ages are for them not merely a harmless breach in history, but a positive evil – not a want of learning, but a perversion of it; not a lack of culture, but a poisoning of it. We might therefore distinguish this model from the privative one by calling it, for want of a better adjective, "corruptive."

Against Petrarch, then, we can put Erasmus – though not the originator, still the best early exemplar of the corruptive model. The very title of his most important work on ignorance, the *Antibarbarorum liber* (1520), reveals his sympathies: scourging the barbarians is the order of the day. It is easy to treat the work as ahistorical, aimed at whatever barbarians and dunces happen to be on hand. We might, however, make the case that the barbarians should be understood as historically specific

enemies by contextualizing it in Erasmus's other works. "The historical view accompanying Erasmus' antibarbarian struggle," writes one critic, "is quite simple":

True civilization is identified with antiquity, and barbarism is identified with the ages which followed antiquity . . . Erasmus clearly adopts the view of history developed in the Italian Renaissance, with a tripartite division of history into a positively valued antiquity, negatively valued Middle Ages, and a present which recuperates the positive achievements of the ancients . . . History has to be cleansed of its barbarous, medieval stains.¹⁶

The central persona of the *Antibarbari*, Batt, has a disgust for the barbarians that goes far beyond pity for their ignorance: "He was as much an enemy of the barbarians as they were hostile to letters; in fact meeting with them often made him vomit or go hot with rage." Batt distinguishes the relatively harmless member of "the army of yokels" from an author who "writes commentaries on the best authors, shedding darkness on them, not light, not adorning but corrupting . . . They have managed to confuse, corrupt, and overturn everything." These more dangerous barbarians have a destructive power, and are "born for the sole purpose of unteaching everything which concerns Good Letters."¹⁷ Against the natural unteaching abilities of the barbarians, Erasmus envisioned his own pedagogy as a kind of quarantine or antidote – the student must "be fortified as by certain efficacious drugs against the poisoned opinions of the common people" – and if some infections slip through, "the first effort must be to rid him of them little by little, to weed out the seeds of trouble." In the margin is the note: "FIRST OF ALL, BASE IDEAS MUST BE TORN OUT."¹⁸

Others ring changes on this basic metaphor for understanding barbarism as corruption. Linacre's motto, *ad fontes*, sums up the corruptive model: to the sources, unsullied by impurity. Some looked not only at ancient texts but at the modern languages as well, as barbaric corruption and pollution are the source of the anxiety over poetic "purity" in the vulgar tongues. Joachim du Bellay blames medieval French writing for its corruption: "Ces vieilles poësies Francoyses . . . corrompent le goust de nostre Langue." Ascham asserts his distaste for the superfluity and corruption in Hall's *Chronicle*, suggesting that "a wise learned man . . . in cutting away wordes and sentences . . . shold leaue to mens vse, a storie . . . twice as good as it was." Milton too relies on the corruptive model of medieval historiography, as on *Of Reformation's* first page: "the foule and sudden corruption, and then after many a tedious age, the

long-deferr'd, but much more wonderfull and happy reformation of the *Church* in these latter dayes."¹⁹ Harping on corrupted purity was a favorite rhetorical tactic in the Protestant Reformation, in which Catholic impurities were to be eradicated from true apostolic Christianity, and Milton develops the motif in characterizing the "threefold corruption" of the medieval bishops: "1. The best times were spreadingly infected. 2. The best men of those times foully tainted. 3. The best writings of those men dangerously adulterated." Like Erasmus's barbarians "shedding darkness" and "unteaching," Milton's bishops have a power to negate, and can be countered only by the Reformation of the Church, "after so many dark Ages, wherein the huge overshadowing traine of *Error* had almost swept all the Starres out of the Firmament of the *Church*."²⁰

HISTORY UNFINISHED, HISTORY DEFACED

This division of historical conceptions into privative and corruptive may seem a perversely Scholastic distinction to impose on sworn anti-Scholastics. There are, however, consequences of real significance, for it helps to illuminate the relationship between historiography and self-definition. The question is this: given enlightened antiquity and a barbarous Middle Age, which is the odd one out? Few moderns doubted the superiority of the ancient classics, but did they represent humanity's true nature from which the Middle Ages were an aberration, or was it the other way around? The question is not a disinterested antiquarian inquiry, but a means of characterizing one's own age. To the privative school, culture seems precarious: ancient and Renaissance culture are exceptional because of the presence of something lacking in the intervening centuries. For the contamination school, on the other hand, enlightenment is the norm: the Middle Ages were barbarous and monstrous because they were infected, and when the infection was rooted out, society returned to its natural state. Vasari, the first to use the term *rinascita*, is also one of the first to explore the larger consequences of this distinction. He develops the privative model: "As the men of the age were not accustomed to see any excellence or greater perfection than the things thus produced [in the Middle Ages], they greatly admired them, and considered them to be the type of perfection, barbarous as they were." Only ignorance prevents the barbarians from recognizing the self-evident value of classical culture. He suggests that this privative model implies that the enlightened state of modernity and antiquity, then, is not natural:

If ever it happens, which God forbid, that the arts should once more fall to a like ruin and disorder, through the negligence of man, the malignity of the age, or the decree of Heaven, which does not appear to wish that the things of this world should remain stationary, these labours of mine . . . may maintain the arts in life, or, at any rate, encourage the better spirits to provide them with every assistance.²¹

For an advocate of the corruptive metaphor, however, enlightened culture is normative, and can be lost only when occluded. "The essence of Truth is plainnesse, and brightness," says Milton; "the darknes and crookednesse is our own . . . If we will but purge with sovraign eyesalve that intellectual ray which *God* hath planted in us, then we would beleeve the Scriptures protesting their own plainnes, and perspicuity."²²

These two sides of the historiographical coin – medieval history as variously deprived and depraved – dominate most subsequent discussions of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. To associate names with these two paradigms is ultimately indefensible, since no significant writer sides entirely with one at the expense of the other. In the most interesting thinkers we can see both the interplay of the two metaphors and the interplay of their larger cultural consequences. Even Erasmus, despite his passion for the so-called corruptive party, recognizes the legitimacy of the other view: both metaphors appear in his letter to Leo X, for instance, when he talks about the recovery of "learning of the best sort, hitherto partly neglected and partly corrupted."²³

The same dichotomy appears at the other end of the sixteenth century. By the time we reach Francis Bacon, whose concerns are far from (and often contrary to) those of the Quattrocento humanists, both metaphors are firmly in place. For all his disparagement of undue veneration of the classical past, Bacon gives us essentially the same two views of the Middle Ages. His call for the new discipline of intellectual history leads him to begin with this first broad mapping of the territory:

In times no less than in regions there are wastes and deserts. For only three revolutions and periods of learning can properly be reckoned; one among the Greeks, the second among the Romans, and the last among us . . . The intervening ages of the world, in respect of any rich or flourishing growth of the sciences, were unprosperous. For neither the Arabians nor the Schoolmen need be mentioned; who in the intermediate times rather crushed the sciences with a multitude of treatises, than increased their weight.²⁴

The first few sentences are pure privation: the Middle Ages are "wastes and deserts." But in the last sentence the traditional Scholastic villains appear as corrupters. Bacon in fact distinguishes *three* models of history,

"Memorials, Perfect histories, and Antiquities." Memorials, he says, "are history unfinished, or the first or rough draughts of history"; "Antiquities are history defaced, or some remnants of history which have casually escaped the shipwreck of time." His call for "perfect histories" comes only after an attack on the two historiographical models from the barbarous centuries. "History unfinished" is marked by mere ignorance – "in these kinds of unperfect histories...any deficiency...is but their nature." "History defaced," on the other hand, is a matter of active rather than privative barbarism: "As for the corruptions and moths of history...the use of them deserveth to be banished...as those that have fretted and corroded the sound bodies of many excellent histories, and wrought them into base and unprofitable dregs."²⁵ He catalogues the threats in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), a kind of prologue to the greatest seventeenth-century excoriation of the vulgar errors of the Dark Ages, Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646).

These two traditions survive together well into the nineteenth century. They coexist in Michelet, for instance, who at one point refers to "L'état bizarre et monstreux, prodigieusement artificiel, qui fut celui du Moyen Age," and only a few pages later holds that "La révolution du seizième siècle...rencontra une mort incroyable, un néant, et partit de rien." This is no contradiction, for Michelet sees them in a temporal relationship: "Anti-nature succeeds banished nature, whence springs spontaneously the two-faced monster of false knowledge and perverse ignorance."²⁶ Not all of Michelet's predecessors or successors had such a tidy theory to account for the relationship of these two ideas, but from the fifteenth century to the twenty-first, they dominate discussions of the medieval and modern worlds.

THE WILD TORRENT OF A BARB'ROUS AGE

Some modern scholars have been profoundly skeptical about the humanists' take on their predecessors, arguing, for example, that Carolingian and twelfth-century French culture rival anything in the putatively enlightened age that followed. Defenders of the Middle Ages have usefully reminded us that the humanists were far from disinterested, and that the picture they drew was sometimes grossly distorted. As Pat Rogers has argued, "A self-consciously 'refined' culture needs to naturalize its prejudices, and the ideological function of 'middle ages' is to give essentially normative terms the force of neutral historical markers."²⁷ In fact these humanist characterizations of their predecessors amount to

little more than public relations, even propaganda: in reducing a millennium of European culture to a uniform "barbarism," they did no justice to Augustine, Aquinas, or Dante. But propaganda, especially successful propaganda, has its own value, and the humanist writers relied on it to carve themselves a niche in history. They asserted the superiority of modernity, albeit a modernity dependent on antiquity.

The eighteenth century, in seeking to understand the age we now call the Renaissance, began by accepting this understanding of the Middle Ages almost uncritically. The humanists defined their own age as that which was not barbarous, neither deprived nor corrupt by comparison with their predecessors, and the age of Johnson bought this self-characterization wholesale. Late in the seventeenth century, for instance, Dryden borrows the privative metaphor to excuse Chaucer's faults by pointing out that "He lived in the infancy of our poetry, and . . . nothing is brought to perfection at the first." Perfection – in its radical sense, completion – necessarily implies a prior incompleteness. Thus Dryden's project of "translating" Chaucer for modern understandings involves filling the cultural lacunae left by Chaucer's barbarous age, and "add[ing] somewhat of my own where I thought my author was deficient, and had not given his thoughts their true lustre, for want of words in the beginning of our language." Thomas Warton uses darkness to characterize medieval culture and light to characterize its successor: "Even from the time of the irruptions of the northern barbarians, some glimmerings of the antient erudition still remained." Compare the "glimmerings" in Henry Headley: "The star of Science no sooner appeared in the British hemisphere, than, struck with the luxury of its beams, the minds of men were suddenly aroused and awakened to the most animated exertions . . . the dark and long-impending clouds of barbarism were dispelled." Upton likewise writes that Ascham, "appearing early amongst our first Restorers both of Learning and sound Religion, by the Light he held forth, was instrumental in dispelling the darkness of former Ages, that so unhappily had overspread the land."²⁸ Petrarch's metaphor flourished.

Alexander Pope, on the other hand, invokes Erasmus in his party-line Erasmian account of the Middle Ages and Renaissance:

Learning and Rome alike in Empire grew,
And *Arts* still follow'd where her *Eagles* flew;
From the same Foes, at last, both felt their Doom,
And the same Age saw *Learning* fall, and *Rome* . . .
A second Deluge *Learning* thus o'er-run,
And the *Monks* finished what the *Goths* begun.

At length, *Erasmus*, that *great*, *injur'd* Name,
 (The *Glory* of the Priesthood, and the *Shame*!)
 Stemm'd the *wild Torrent* of a *barb'rous Age*,
 And drove those *Holy Vandals* off the Stage.²⁹

The association of the fall of culture with the sack of Rome, the attacks on Scholasticism (wittily conflating monks and Goths), and the figuring of the Dark Ages as overrun by savages – all are sixteenth-century commonplaces, albeit couched in an unmistakably eighteenth-century idiom. And Pope was not alone in recovering Erasmus's disgust for "Holy Vandals." John Oldmixon picks up on the religious corruption when he speaks of "the several *Reformers* that attempted to purge Religion of the Filth contracted in the Course of many Corrupted Ages."³⁰

Just as the two paradigms of privation and corruption were intermingled in the early modern authors, they coexist in the eighteenth century, even at the risk of inconsistency. William Winstanley, for instance, looks back to the fourteenth century to find the beginning of the English golden age, and praises Chaucer's "earnest desire to enrich and beautifie our *English Tongue*, which in those days was very rude and barren." "Barren" here connotes an emptiness waiting for cultivation, a clear statement of the privative critique of medieval culture. But he also finds Gower "the first refiner of our *English Tongue*," switching from an agricultural to a metallurgical or alchemical metaphor to point out the cultural and linguistic impurities that must be burnt out. Gibbon sees Christian barbarians as "immersed in ignorance," but "their vulgar tongues were marked with the rudeness and poverty of the manners." Thomas Warton, the first to publish a comprehensive history of English literature, also uses the two metaphors willy-nilly, even in the same sentence: "Italy, during the darkest periods of monastic ignorance, had always maintained a greater degree of refinement and knowledge than any other European country" – darkness and refinement make for a curiously mixed metaphor, explicable only in the context of this long tradition of characterizing the Middle Ages. So too with privative exile and corruptive vandals in William Collins's account of the beginning and end of the Dark Ages: "As Arts expir'd, resistless Dulness rose; / *Goths, Priests*, or *Vandals*, – all were Learning's Foes. / Till *Julius* first recall'd each exil'd Maid . . ." ³¹

These are the metaphors Samuel Johnson inherited, passed down from Petrarch and Erasmus through Dryden and Pope. His account of sixteenth-century England echoes the traditional humanistic argument about an emergence from barbaric darkness:

The English nation, in the time of Shakespeare, was yet struggling to emerge from barbarity. The philology of Italy had been transplanted hither in the reign of Henry the Eighth; and the learned languages had been successfully cultivated by Lilly, Linacer, and More... But literature was yet confined to professed scholars, or to men and women of high rank. The publick was gross and dark.³²

The language here, as in many early humanistic accounts of the Dark Ages, is predominantly privative: the passage ends with darkness, from which the new age is still struggling to emerge. But the corruptive model also shows up in his verse history of the English stage, which opens with a striking couplet:

When Learning's triumph o'er her barb'rous foes
First rear'd the stage, immortal SHAKESPEAR rose.³³

Humanist learning trumps medieval barbarism, and a new age dawns.

TEXTS FREE FROM ADULTERATION

Nothing better illustrates the interplay of the privative and corruptive models than the dispersal of texts. One of the great scholarly projects of the fifteenth century, given new impetus by the invention of movable type, was the reproduction of the texts of the ancient world. Petrarch, a leading participant in this effort, sought to bring these texts to light, to fill the medieval intellectual void with classical matter. But not long after he and his contemporaries began publishing long-forgotten works, many humanists were anxious about the state of the texts they were releasing. And no one was more anxious about textual corruption than Angelo Poliziano, who waged his historiographical war in the field of textual criticism. Rather than optimistically and uncritically piling text upon text, Poliziano took pains to reject what was barbarous even *within* the ancient texts. Petrarch and other figures in the revival of learning of course recognized that the old texts had been badly transmitted through the Dark Ages, but Poliziano thought they arrived positively soiled. Removing that pollution became for him an obsession.

Petrarch and Poliziano form an instructive pair, for their respective approaches to classical texts illuminate complementary conceptions of the rebirth of classical letters. The distinction between the two is clearest in a comparison of their greatest works: the Petrarchan *De ignorantia* on the one hand, emphasizing what is missing, and Poliziano's *Castigationes* on the other, emphasizing what must be censured. We might call them

Renaissance as restoration *versus* Renaissance as eradication. Petrarch's project was the recovery and multiplication of texts; Poliziano's was the excision and reduction of exemplars. This much is evident in the latter's development of genealogical philology, in which he established the grounds on which textual witnesses should be disregarded as sullied – the *eliminatio codicum descriptorum*. Anthony Grafton explains his proto-Lachmannian stemmatic method:

Given three sources *A*, *B*, and *C*, all of which agreed on a given point; if *B* and *C* depended entirely on *A* for their information, should they be considered to add any weight to *A*'s testimony? Poliziano insisted that they should not . . .

For him, the object is no longer . . . simply to amass evidence, but to discriminate, to reduce the number of witnesses that the scholar need take into account.³⁴

As the *translatio studii* took humanism north and west, this model of textual transmission came along. It is no coincidence that this passage comes from Grafton's book on Joseph Scaliger, who works in Poliziano's "corruptive" tradition, as Grafton's metaphors of infection reveal. Finding the text of Festus "extremely corrupt," Scaliger realized "desperate remedies were needed," and was "both willing and able to burn and cut . . . If his desperate scalpel sometimes sank too deep, much of his surgery was curative as well as brilliant."³⁵ Corruption, burning, cutting, scalpels – the language everywhere suggests a desire to excise what is impure. A similar concern shows up in Milton, who finds Catholicism corrupt to the core, and who approaches Popery as if it were a disease. The terms he uses to attack Catholic doctrine repay attention: "Who knows not how many surreptitious works are ingraff'd into the legitimate writings of the Fathers, and of those Books that passe for authentick who knows what hath bin tamper'd withall, what hath bin raz'd out, what hath bin inserted?"³⁶ He finds corruption not only in men, not only in minds, but in books. Theological legitimacy rests on textual legitimacy, a central concern of the early humanists.

The age of Johnson, then, inherited a set of methods and metaphors from the humanists, but with one fundamental difference: the texts in question were not only ancient and Latin, but also modern and vernacular. The change amounted to a revolution in eighteenth-century taste. "If the '[Elizabethan] Revival' is to be traced to any one factor," writes Earl Wasserman, "it is to the transference of the method employed in editing classical texts to the editing of the English classics."³⁷ The eighteenth century realized, in other words, that the works of the

age of Elizabeth would benefit from classical treatment. Rymer's 1709 edition of Shakespeare is important in this connection: it marks a significant break from the handling of Shakespeare's text in the seventeenth century, when a series of anonymous compilers produced the four folios. Seventeenth-century editions of Shakespeare were not published entirely without care, but they show none of the *reverence* accorded to the texts by Rymer, Pope, Theobald, and their successors. Eighteenth-century textual critics fought with one another, often fiercely, and proposed many incompatible standards by which to determine the true text of Shakespeare. For all their diversity, though, they were jointly committed to recovering Shakespeare's words and rooting out interpolations.

As we have seen in Valla, in Poliziano, and in Milton, historiographical speculation readily manifests itself in linguistic and textual criticism. And Johnson, one of the most important editors of his century, was sensitive to the historiographical implications of his work. In shepherding works from the age of Elizabeth into the age of Johnson, he reproduces the work of the humanists of three or four centuries earlier. The two historiographical models come along, sometimes, even, in the same sentence: "Not a single passage in the whole work has appeared to me corrupt, which I have not attempted to restore; or obscure, which I have not endeavoured to illustrate."³⁸

No writer prompted more eighteenth-century editorial labors than Shakespeare, for it was a commonplace that his texts were in exceptionally bad shape, and had suffered more than any others in their transmission. Lewis Theobald laments in 1726 that "we have scarce any Book in the *English* Tongue more fertile of Errors, than the Plays of SHAKESPEARE," a complaint Thomas Hanmer echoes in 1744: "The works of this Author . . . were more injured and abused than perhaps any that ever pass'd the Press." Zachary Grey agrees in 1754: "No *dramatic poet*, either antient or modern, has had the hard fate of our author; or contains still more mistakes, than the plays of the most celebrated *Shakespeare*." Warburton has the same gripe: Shakespeare's works "at length . . . struggled into Light; but so disguised and travested, that no classic Author, after having run ten secular Stages thro' the blind Cloisters of Monks and Canons, ever came out in half so maimed and mangled a Condition."³⁹ Notice that the seventeenth century is being compared to the Dark Ages: the humanist vilification of actual monks has become metaphorical, and the two models of medieval history are used to describe textual transmission through a figurative dark age. Johnson elaborates. Shakespeare's works were

vitiated by the blunders of the penman, or changed by the affectation of the player; perhaps enlarged to introduce a jest, or mutilated to shorten the representation . . . thrust into the world surreptitiously and hastily, they suffered another deprivation from the ignorance and negligence of the printers . . . It is not easy for invention to bring together so many causes concurring to vitiate a text. No other authour ever gave up his works to fortune and time with so little care . . . and in no other age was the art of printing in such unskilful hands.⁴⁰

The intrusion of Renaissance historiographical metaphors into eighteenth-century editorial theory is no accident. Johnson saw his textual criticism as fulfilling a Renaissance legacy: he places himself at the end of an exalted tradition when he writes, "Conjectural criticism has been of great use in the learned world; nor is it my intention to depreciate a study, that has exercised so many mighty minds, from the revival of learning to our own age," and follows this passage with allusions to Scaliger and Lipsius.⁴¹ He has Scaliger in mind when he proposes an emendation to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "Scaliger transposed the lines of Virgil's *Gallus*. Why may not the same experiment be ventured upon Shakespeare." He knew not only Petrarch's work but also its place in literary history, as when he described Petrarch's poetic gift in the *Life of Cowley*: "Petrarch, who, in an age rude and uncultivated, by his tuneful homage to his Laura, refined the manners of the lettered world, and filled Europe with love and poetry." Poliziano, too, was a personal hero: on his arrival in London Johnson planned an edition of the Latin works of "Politian, a name eminent among the restorers of polite literature."⁴² Thus he writes in his Shakespeare edition, "These corruptions I have often silently rectified; for the history of our language, and the true force of our words, can only be preserved, by keeping the text of authours free from adulteration."⁴³ The echoes of Poliziano and Scaliger are apparent: Shakespeare's text suffers from infection, which it is the editor's job to expunge. Johnson is significantly the first to apply Poliziano's stemmatic method to modern authors, and the first to reject derivative witnesses of an English work, as in his comments on Theobald's edition:

In his enumeration of editions, he mentions the first two folios as high, and the third folio as of middle authority; but the truth is, that the first is equivalent to all others, and that the rest only deviate from it by the printer's negligence. Whoever has any of the folios has all, excepting those diversities which mere reiteration of editions will produce. I collated them all at the beginning, but afterwards used only the first.⁴⁴

The similarities to Poliziano's *eliminatio codicum descriptorum* are unmistakable. Johnson's critical practice, as Malone and Steevens noticed, often

fell short of the standard he set for himself, and he unhappily followed the eighteenth-century practice of using the *textus receptus* as copytext rather than an early folio or quarto. But his regard for editorial theory, and his twin concerns for textual privation and corruption, show that he was the first Englishman to internalize the humanistic lessons in the editing of vernacular classics.

THE DIGNITY OF AN ANCIENT

Vernacular classics are exactly what were at stake. The eighteenth century was the first age consciously to develop a canon of English classics. This move was possible only after the age of Shakespeare became “the last age,” for classics are not only great works, but *old* works. Frank Kermode argues that immediacy and contemporaneity are essential elements of a classic – “The doctrine of classic as model or criterion entails... the assumption that the ancient can be more or less immediately relevant and available, in a sense contemporaneous with the modern” – but he might also have made the opposite case, for a classic is the point of contact between the new and the old, in which proximity and distance mingle. The eighteenth century had achieved just enough distance from the age of Shakespeare to treat his works as modern classics. After a hundred years, writes Johnson, “the term commonly fixed as the test of literary merit,” Shakespeare “may now begin to assume the dignity of an ancient, and claim the privilege of established fame and prescriptive veneration.”⁴⁵

In according Shakespeare the dignity of an ancient, eighteenth-century critics perhaps inevitably followed sixteenth-century examples, for the early humanists were the most self-conscious collectors and propagators of old classics. Nor should it be surprising that they used the twin metaphors of privation and corruption to create the canon of the great works of antiquity, favoring those of the first century B.C. Works by Lucretius and Tacitus were newly celebrated for bringing classical light to a dark modernity, while many Barthollist legal scholars and Scholastic philosophers were jettisoned as worthless. The deserving texts had to be passed down through a deprived age, and kept free of medieval contaminations. The familiar categories of privation and corruption were useful to the critics assembling the new canons.

Eighteenth-century critics, too, found them useful for thinking not only about the classics of antiquity, but also about the newly conceived modern and vernacular classics. It is perhaps no coincidence that the

“modern classic” rises in English literature at the same time that the *querelle des anciens et des modernes* was entering its decline. The literature of the English Renaissance began to be treated as the product of another age, which demanded the sort of historically informed interpretation that the Renaissance writers accorded to the works of antiquity. Patrick Hume’s 321 pages of *Annotations to Paradise Lost* (1695) mark the first serious attempt to give a modern vernacular work a classical treatment. “All the obscure parts [are] render’d in phrases more familiar,” writes Hume, and “the old and obsolete words” are “explain’d and made easie to the English reader” – the commentary betrays no sense that Milton’s poem was then only twenty-eight years old.⁴⁶ From it flowed a torrent of editions of English works on classical models. George Sewall, in his Preface to the unauthorized seventh volume of Pope’s *Shakespeare*, is clear about the necessity of treating the works of the age of Elizabeth as modern classics: “What then has been done by the really Learned to the dead Languages . . . we in Justice owe to our own great Writers, both in Prose and Poetry. They are in some degree our *Classics*.” Robert Anderson, writing seven decades later, notes that Shakespeare’s works were published “with an accumulation of emendatory criticism and philological learning, unparalleled in the illustration of any of the classical writers of antiquity.” And although Richard Bentley went too far in his *Paradise Lost* (1732), suggesting notoriously inappropriate conjectural emendations to a recent printed work, he demonstrates convincingly that Renaissance works were now English classics. “The key question,” says Kristine Haugen, “is not how a hopeless pedant like Bentley could believe he had the right to edit *Paradise Lost*, but rather why a celebrated classical scholar like Bentley should have decided to edit *Paradise Lost*.”⁴⁷

Like the early humanists, eighteenth-century critics applied the ideas of privation and corruption both historically and aesthetically, using the two categories to reinforce one another. These metaphors, working in tandem, provided the dynamic by which classics were formed – and the creation of classics means the creation of a canon. The eighteenth century set about the business in the same way as their humanist predecessors: some works were celebrated, some reviled, and many ignored.

The first step is to recognize a lack that the modern classic can fill. John Upton thus uses a privative metaphor in describing his reason for reprinting Ascham’s *Scholemaster*: “When I first undertook the bringing of this Treasure into Light, more valuable than the Gold of *Ophir*, it had lain above an Age little known unto the World.” Robert Anderson takes pride in being the first to shepherd some Tudor and early Stuart works into the

English canon, a canon openly compared to the classical one. Drayton's works "are now for the first time received into a collection of classical English poetry"; Carew's *Coelum Britannicum* "is now, with his poems, for the first time, admitted into a collection of classical English poetry" – the sentiment is repeated, in nearly the same words, for Samuel Daniel, William Browne, Giles Fletcher, Ben Jonson, and William Davenant.⁴⁸ This sort of inclusion presupposes a lack.

But canons are not so inclusive as to be ecumenical, and the delight in filling cultural vacuity is always paired with vigilance in excluding undesirables. Not all the works of the English Renaissance, in other words, made it into the eighteenth-century canon. They were excluded on grounds similar to those used by the humanists: they were rejected as barbarous. It is perhaps surprising to see the texts of the golden ages of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries censured as examples of barbarity, but (as we shall see) many extended the revival of learning in England well into the seventeenth century, not granting even Shakespeare's contemporaries a full measure of enlightenment. David Hume even suggests that had Milton "lived in a later age, and learned to polish some rudeness in his verses," he would have "enjoyed better fortune." Thomas Warton, too, notes that in Milton's day, "our poetry was not yet purged from its Gothic combinations; nor had legitimate notions of discrimination and propriety so far prevailed, as sufficiently to influence the growing improvements of English composition."⁴⁹ This consideration paradoxically casts much of the age of Elizabeth in the same terms the early humanists used to describe the Goths: Elizabethans and even Jacobean are accused of ignorance, rudeness, superstition, and worse. The humanists' weapons were turned against their creators as the barbarous was assiduously weeded out of the new canon.

We may see this sort of canon creation best in a few examples of eighteenth-century handling of earlier poetry. The inclusion mentioned above is everywhere evident, as eighteenth-century critics published a growing stream of important works from the age of Elizabeth in new editions and florilegia. Inclusiveness, however, is balanced by rejection of things that did not measure up. The first example is infamous. Johnson's dismissal of the sonnet in the *Dictionary* as "not very suitable to the English language" is memorable for its bluntness and, of course, its seeming perversity. But a brief glance at poems written and anthologized in the eighteenth century reveals that his judgment was not idiosyncratic: the continuation of his definition, "and has not been used by any man of eminence since *Milton*," is entirely accurate. Apart from scattered minor

efforts by Thomas Edwards, Thomas Warton, and Thomas Gray, the first important eighteenth-century collection of sonnets was published by Charlotte Smith in the year of Johnson's death.⁵⁰ Wordsworth's hortation, "Scorn not the Sonnet," is an attempt to restore to canonical status the poetic tradition which ran from Petrarch, through Tasso, Camões, Spenser, and Shakespeare, up to Milton, but which was thoroughly moribund in the age of the frowning "Critic" to whom he addresses his poem.

Johnson is one of the most influential eighteenth-century commentators on Metaphysical poetry; in addition to popularizing the term, he traced the school from Marino, through Donne, and to Suckling, Waller, Denham, Cowley, and Cleveland.⁵¹ These poets had little chance of passing Johnson's critical muster, however, given his discussion of their poetic style: "Language suffers violence by harsh or by daring figures, by transposition, by unusual acceptations of words, and by any licence, which would be avoided by a writer of prose." His criticism is well known: "The fault of Cowley, and perhaps of all the writers of the metaphysical race, is that of pursuing his thoughts to their last ramifications, by which he loses the grandeur of generality, for of the greatest things the parts are little; what is little can be but pretty."⁵² Such undignified prettiness is characteristic of many eighteenth-century attitudes toward the poetry of the Middle Ages. Arthur Murphy is right to notice that eighteenth-century criticism of the Metaphysical poets, especially Johnson's, uses the same terms of opprobrium the humanists applied to their rivals: "In Johnson's review of Cowley's works," he writes, "false wit is detected in all its shapes, and the Gothic taste for glittering conceits, and far-fetched allusions, is exploded, never, it is hoped, to revive again." Cooper can render Donne admirable only by classing him with the satirists rather than the lyricists; in the early decades of the century, in fact, his prose was more widely known than his lyric verse. The situation changed only late in the century: in 1792, for instance, Anderson could note that "Donne is better known as a poet, than as a divine." But even at that late date, Anderson could recycle this criticism of the Metaphysical style: "All [Donne's] contemporaries are lavish in his praise. Prejudiced, perhaps, by the style of writing which was then fashionable, they seem to have rated his performances beyond their just value."⁵³ The implication is clear: Metaphysical conceits were "fashionable," but we have now arrived at a more just and permanent estimation of their value.

It should be obvious that canons are not disinterested catalogues of great works, but collections that speak to and for the cultures that form them, telling us as much about the age in which they are codified as

about the age in which they were written. What is perhaps less obvious is that the literary canon is the product of a complex set of attitudes toward the past, and emerges from historiographical conceptions of what it means to be modern. The classic and the contemporary are always in an implicit dialogue, and when Johnson helps to build the eighteenth-century canon, he does so on a distinction between enlightened and benighted. He uses the privative and corruptive metaphors for the very reasons the humanists themselves initially developed them: it is an act of self-constitution. Johnson, like Petrarch and Poliziano, places himself and his age into a historical narrative. His is an age that follows Shakespeare's emergence from barbarity, and is therefore aligned with modern enlightenment rather than Gothic darkness.